

Ban On Bait Acquisition Being Considered

Yankton Press & Dakotan

In an effort to slow the spread of Asian carp, the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Commission has proposed the closure of several local rivers to bait acquisition year round.

The proposal would ban both commercial and non-commercial acquisition of bait from the James, Big Sioux and Vermillion rivers. The Missouri River below Gavins Point Dam would also be included, as the dam serves as a barrier to the carp's upstream movement into the Missouri River Reservoirs.

"We realize this is going to affect some individuals who enjoy taking bait, but we believe it is a necessary step to prevent the spread of species that have the potential to negatively impact our fishery resources in the state," said John Lott, chief of aquatic resources for South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks.

The two species of interest are the silver carp and bighead carp, which are similar in appearance to gizzard shad, a type of fish that is commonly captured and used for bait.

Allowing bait acquisition to continue would help the Asian carp spread into other waters within the state, which would adversely impact both native fishes and recreational fisheries, Lott said.

"They are an exotic species, and they tend to tie up a lot of the production of fish in rivers," he said. The carp can also pose problems for humans, Lott said.

"There is a hazard for boaters and recreational users from these carp jumping up," he said. "In places where they are very common, like the Mississippi River, a lot of the boat operators there will build a cage around the driver to protect themselves from being hit by these flying carp."

A public hearing for the proposal will take place at 2 p.m. Thursday at the Ramkota Inn in Pierre.

Lott added that written comments can still be emailed to wildinfo@state.sd.us, but since the deadline has already passed, there is no guarantee they will be received and included in the public record.

Following the hearing, the Game, Fish and Parks Commission will finalize the measure either Thursday or Friday during a meeting in Pierre.

CSP bighorns showing signs of improvement

Black Hills Pioneer Press

CUSTER STATE PARK — The disease that virtually wiped out the bighorn sheep population at Custer State Park may be waning.

Four lambs have survived so far this season and park wildlife officials see hope, although it is much too early to tell of the success definitively.

"We're optimistic that they will survive this winter," said Chad Lehman, a wildlife biologist with the park.

Eight lambs were born this spring.

In December 2004, the sheep within the park were about 200 strong. But in January 2005, biologists began to see dead bighorns within the park. It was the beginning of an all-age die-off that was the result of *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*, a pneumonia-causing pasteurilla bacteria.

Now, between 20 and 25 bighorns live within the park; seven are rams.

This die-off is not an isolated incident. Bighorn populations in Colorado, Wyoming and Arizona, among other states, have faced similar fates. Lehman said the disease sometimes takes nine to 15 years to run its course — the park is in its seventh year.

The adult bighorns are showing signs of immunity to the disease, but the lambs are still suffering. In 2010, Lehman said "five lambs came down with ewes off the cliffs over here. Within two weeks, they were all dead."

Biologists used antibiotics on the sheep, but Lehman said he didn't know how effective they really were.

Outside the park, the Black Hills' main bighorn herd is on the decline.

Biologists knew that mountain lions were killing a significant number of lambs. They began a study in which lambs were fitted with radio collars that would emit a "mortality signal." What wildlife officials found was a surprise.

"We're looking specifically to see what lions are doing to the herd, but what we found was that perhaps a bigger issue is the pneumonia complex," John Kanta, the regional wildlife manager with the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks, said previously.

"We assumed that in the main Black Hills herd we didn't have any of that going on. Actually, as part of our research ... we found we are losing a lot of lambs to pneumonia up here," he added.

The department is in its second year of a three-year field study in which the ewes and later lambs are radio collared.

In 2010, all 25 lambs collared died. Thus far in 2011, only two of the 28 lambs collared are still alive — the main cause of death is pneumonia, followed closely by mountain lion predation. Other causes of death have included falls, abandonment and hypothermia.

"It doesn't appear that it is an all-age die-off, and that has us scratching our heads a bit," Kanta said.

The rams and ewes appear to remain in good health, and there are other lambs remaining in the herd that were not collared.

"There is not a lot we can do about it," Kanta said.

The department tried an experimental vaccine last year, but "it doesn't appear to have worked."

This year the biologists will try another vaccine, "one that was developed based specifically on the strain of bugs we have here," Kanta said.

"We have a declining population, and that is not a good outlook," he said.

The smaller Elk Mountain herd remains stable in numbers.

Nebraska won't hold bighorn sheep season in 2012

LINCOLN -- There will be no legal hunting of bighorn sheep next year in Nebraska.

The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission has decided not to hold a 2012 season in order to ease pressure on the Fort Robinson herd.

Officials say there are two bighorn sheep herds in the state's northern Panhandle region, but the Fort Robinson herd has the biggest and oldest rams that hunters prefer. Herds in the Wildcat Hills region in the southern Panhandle also have only younger rams available for hunting.

Discussions have begun on relocating bighorns from Alberta, Canada, to the western Pine Ridge area of Nebraska early next year.

Bighorns were reintroduced to Nebraska in 1981 after they'd vanished from the state because of habitat loss, disease and unregulated hunting.

Host shares passion for experience with guests

Aberdeen American News

Being a host for hunters is more than just fields and pheasants — it's about getting together and having a great time with familiar faces.

"All of the hunters in my group consist of family and friends from high school and college," said Aberdeen resident Jeff Harms, who has been a host for out-of-town visitors for 21 years during pheasant season.

Harms helps with travel plans, finding hotel rooms, planning hunting dates, showing hunters around town, and making sure the visitors are fed well, he said.

This year, Harms is host for 18 hunters and a few dogs, he said. The number changes every year.

"It really depends on what people have going on in their lives," he said. "Some people come every year, while others come every few years."

For one hunter who lives in Japan, this is his first time back in 10 years, Harms said.

Pheasant hunting is a great part of what South Dakota is about, and people from other areas sometimes don't get a chance to have such an experience, he said.

"If you grew up around here, you know how special hunting season is, and it's nice to share that with others that are not from the area," Harms said.

Harms' visitors come from a wide range of places, including, of course, Japan, but also Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, Texas, Wyoming — and even South Dakota.

Pat Tulley, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has come every year for the past 17 years.

"I really enjoy coming here and we always have a great time," Tulley said.

The hunters have a great bond with each other, he said.

"Working in a big group can make it easier to get birds, but you also have to be aware of where the other hunters are," Tulley said.

Hunters swap stories of their experiences hunting in rain, hail and snow, he said.

Harms says he always enjoys spending time with the out-of-town visitors.

"Overall, I enjoy hosting the hunters; that's why I continue to do so," he said. "The best part about it is that you get to share a passion with friends."

Mountain Lions: From nearly gone to a huntable surplus

Rapid City Journal

Steve Griffin remembers that lion back in the 1990s. It was the first he had ever seen in the Black Hills.

But it wouldn't be the last. Far from it.

As a wildlife biologist for the state Game, Fish & Parks Department in Rapid City, Griffin has watched over the last 20 years as the mountain lion went from a startling novelty to a daily fact of life in the Black Hills.

"Back when it started, it was unusual. We'd get a report here and a report there," said Griffin, who began his GF&P career in Rapid City as a resources specialist in 1991. "I remember I saw one from a helicopter during an elk survey. And that was a really big deal. We circled around to look again."

Fast forward 15 or 20 years and there are lions crossing roads, lions in people's yards, lions walking down streets in the middle of Rapid City.

Not all the time. Not every day. But regularly.

Now, there is even a hunting season on lions, one that last winter killed 49 of the big cats.

What a difference a couple of decades can make.

From a protected creature covered under the state's threatened species law 20 years ago, the lion has become a relatively common inhabitant of the Black Hills. It has gone from a rarity to being reclassified as a big-game animal hunted and killed by the dozens each year.

GF&P Commissioner John Cooper of Pierre, who served as GF&P Department secretary from 1995 to 2007, also watched the progression of lions in the Black Hills from a shadowy piece of history to a reality of modern life. When Cooper was appointed by former Gov. Bill Janklow to lead GF&P early in 1995, one of his first stops was at the agency's regional office in Rapid City.

There he learned from staff members that lions were a developing issue.

"The staff there said they were getting more lion reports and more confirmation by trappers and our officers of lion tracks and lion kills on deer and prey," Cooper said. "That was the first indication I had that we were going to have to manage a species that had basically been extirpated from the Black Hills region, and from South Dakota for all practical purposes."

Lions had indeed been rare in the Black Hills since early in the 1900s. There were stories. There were tracks. There were occasional sightings. But the big cat's status for most of the 1900s appeared deserving of the threatened rating it finally received in state law in 1978.

After that, the change came relatively quickly in terms of rebounding wildlife species. John Kanta, regional wildlife manager for GF&P in Rapid City, said the lion recovery occurred through western states during the last 20 or 25 years.

South Dakota was a bit late in providing protection to the mountain lion, which was the target of unregulated hunting and even bounties, which existed until 1966.

"If you look back on that period around the turn of the century, we pretty much wiped them out," Kanta said of lions. "Here in South Dakota, we didn't protect the lion until 1978. Farther west of us, that protection occurred earlier, in the 1960s. And those states were already seeing lion numbers rebound when we placed the lions on South Dakota's threatened species list."

As lion populations increased in states to the west, "surplus" animals above the carrying capacity of given lion range migrated. Some ended up in the Black Hills, Kanta said.

The eventual establishment of home ranges by female lion here is what allowed the population to begin building.

"So you go along with basically no lions, then a few start popping up, then you see a pretty significant increase in the growth curve," Kanta said.

"When you see the females establish, you also see that exponential growth in breeding activity. That's where it takes off."

It took off here in the hills. And Cooper got to watch a lot of it happen as GF&P secretary. He also led the department in asking state legislators to remove the lion from the protected list, allowing the GF&P Commission to establish a limited lion season in 2005.

That process survived court challenges from those who feared hunting would again wipe out the local lion population. Cooper said he never believed that would happen under modern wildlife management policies. Neither did he anticipate a lion season that would kill 49 cats, as the 2011 season did earlier this year.

Cooper, who retired as GF&P secretary in 2007, now serves on the citizen's commission that oversees the GF&P Department. He was one of two votes earlier this month against a commission decision to set the 2012 mountain lion season kill quota at 70 lions overall or 50 female lions.

Commissioners who voted for 70-lion quota, which is 20 more than this year's combined quota, did so in part because of concern among hunters that lions are killing too many elk and deer.

Cooper understands that concern but preferred the GF&P staff's recommendation of 60 lions or a sub quota of 40 female cats. And he worries a bit that South Dakota's quota of 70, when added to a season in the Black Hills of Wyoming that could kill 40 lions, will result in a sport-hunting kill of more than 100 lions.

"To me, that seems like a significant amount of lions," Cooper said. "So we'll see."

Cooper doesn't worry about wiping out the lion. But the commission should be prepared to adjust numbers in the future if indications are that the quota was set too high.

But whether the quota is 50, 60 or 70, Cooper remains amazed at how high it has become.

"That's not something I would ever have imagined when we started managing lions," Cooper said. "I wouldn't have figured on more than 20 or so a year."

WI: Recruitment is aim of bill

Madison - Five Republican legislators and several co-sponsors introduced what they call the "Sportsman Heritage Bill," AB 311, in October, a bill that would lower license costs for first-time hunters, give a \$20 license rebate to veteran hunters who recruit a new hunter, create a 15-member recruiting task force, and create adult-only hunter ed field days.

Rep. Jim Steineke, R-Kaukauna, said the legislation is designed to protect and reinvigorate Wisconsin's sporting community.

"As someone who hunts and fishes, I am really excited about this bill," Steineke said.

The bill establishes:

- A "Sporting Recruitment and Retention Task Force" would be a 15-member group to provide recommendations to the Natural Resources Board and Legislature.

It would include two people appointed by the governor; two people each appointed by the Assembly speaker and Senate majority leader (one Republican and one Democrat from each house); one member of the Conservation Congress; two people appointed by the DNR secretary (each must have held a patron license for two out of the past three years); and five appointed by the DNR secretary from nominations from sporting groups.

The individuals would represent the interests deer hunting, bear hunting, waterfowl hunting, upland game hunting, trapping, and furbearer hunting. In addition, the DNR secretary, or her designee, will serve on the task force. Members will have three-year terms.

- Low-cost first-time licenses, would mean anyone who has not bought a hunting or trapping license in the past 10 years would receive a license for \$4.25. If the person is a nonresident, his fee would be 50 percent of the normal nonresident license.

- The DNR would offer adult-only hunter and trapper education programs. This would allow adults to take the course online, and field testing would be only for adults so they don't feel uncomfortable in a new hunter or trapper class with youngsters.

- High school students who complete any DNR hunter safety program would receive a half-credit.

- Sportsmen and women who bring in new people to hunting or trapping would receive a \$20 credit toward their next DNR license purchase. Details need to be finalized how many new hunters and trappers must be recruited for this credit. This would not apply to fishing.

- The DNR would be required to give priority to Stewardship purchases where all five activities (hunting, fishing, trapping, cross country skiing, and hiking) would be allowed. If the DNR wants to buy land that limits any of those uses, it would require unanimous approval by the Natural Resources Board. The bill also requires the DNR to look at whether the grant would benefit local businesses and economy.

- It would create a free ice-fishing weekend the first weekend following Jan. 1, similar to the free fishing weekend in June.

- To encourage participation in the sturgeon-spearing season, it would allow 12-year-olds to buy a license for the spearing season. Currently, only those 14 and older may buy a license.

The bill is co-authored by Rep. Scott Suder, Assembly majority leader, R-Abbotsford, Rep. Rover Rivard, R-Rice Lake, Sen. Pam Galloway, R-Wausau, and Rep. Terry Moulton, R-Chippewa Falls. Within days after the bill was announced, it had 38 co-sponsors.

Suder said sportsmen make substantial contributions to Wisconsin, and often are the leading force behind habitat protection efforts and that they benefit the economy.

"Unfortunately the sporting population continues to age and more than twice as many hunters are leaving the sport as are taking it up," Suder said. "Tradition doesn't mean much if there is no one to carry it on."

Rivard said hunting adds \$1.4 billion to the Wisconsin economy every year, and supports more than 25,000 jobs.

Galloway said this will especially benefit women, who make up less than 10 percent of hunters. She hopes a large number of Wisconsin women will be recruited into the sport.

The bill was supported in comments by Bret Gardner, of the National Rifle Association, Dean Hamilton, of United Sportsmen of Wisconsin, and Larry Bonde, of the Conservation Congress. The Congress had not yet taken a position on the bill, but does support efforts to work on recruitment and retention issues.

In response to a question about whether this was tied to the new deer trustee the governor hired to study deer management, Suder said the legislation does not deal with wildlife management, but instead with making sure the future of hunting, fishing, and trapping is secure.

"But we also need accurate deer counts - we need accurate deer counts based on science and not politics and there is a reason to have the 'deer czar,' " Suder added.

Steineke said he'd like to see the bill passed this fall and go into effect in 2012.

According to figures the DNR provides to the federal government to receive federal funds, the number of hunters buying a Wisconsin hunting license has decreased from 784,003 to 718,261 in 2009. Those same figures show that Wisconsin fishing licenses have increased from 1.357 million in 1995 to 1.426 million in 2009.

A study by the DNR and UW-Madison Applied Population Laboratory shows that the number of gun deer-hunting licenses declined from 644,991 in 2000 to 602,791 in 2010, or a 6.5-percent decline in 10 years. The study predicts that future male gun deer hunter numbers will decline dramatically in the next 10 to 20 years.

The DNR sold a total of 18,941 trapping licenses in 1999. Sales increased to more than 20,000 trapping licenses for each of the next eight years, but declined to 18,520 in 2010.

Montana hunters tally 44 wolf kills across state as season gets under way

Billings Gazette

Hunters through the second weekend of the rifle season for wolves bagged 44 of the large predators throughout the state.

By Monday, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks had checked 44 wolves in the 14 districts statewide. Biologists said that signifies a steady kill with roughly four weeks of deer and elk hunting and two full months of the wolf season remaining.

"Having 44 wolves killed at this point in the season and the sharp increase of harvest we had at the start of the rifle season is encouraging," said Mike Thompson, FWP Region 2 wildlife manager in Missoula.

The wolf hunt began for archery and for the early backcountry rifle hunters in early September. By the Oct. 22 start of the statewide deer and elk rifle season, hunters had killed 11 wolves throughout the state.

But the bulk of the wolf harvest in the state's second season for wolves was expected to come during the deer and elk season, when many more hunters take to the field. Montana held its first ever wolf hunt in 2009, when hunters took 73 wolves before it was shut down. Thompson said thus far the wolves killed have been well distributed throughout the state.

There are, however, a few spots where the wolf hunt has been slow. Those include the West Fork of the Bitterroot River area, where biologists want to reduce wolf numbers to help the struggling elk herd and set a quota of 18 wolves. Hunters have only killed two there so far.

In the lower Clark Fork district 200, which has a quota of 22 wolves, only one has been taken. And in the district that encompasses the Big Hole Valley and most of Granite and Deer Lodge counties, wolf unit 210, hunters have killed three wolves from the quota of 36.

"That's progress," Thompson said. "But in the Missoula area and in the Bitterroot in particular, we need a lot more harvest and we're hoping for that to pick up."

Thompson added that biologist have heard from hunters who have seen wolves, yet didn't have a license for them. They're also hearing from hunters who actively pursued wolves, rather than just buying the tag to have while chasing deer or elk.

"People are interested and going through the effort to hunt wolves and succeeding -- that marks a change from 2009," he said. "

In northwest Montana's Region 1, hunters have killed 17 wolves. John Fraley, FWP regional spokesman, said the mild weather of the first nine days of the season made wolf hunting tough.

"People are seeing a lot of wolf sign now that we're getting some snow in the high country," he said. "We expect that the harvest will pick up."

And in Region 3 covering southwestern Montana, the mild weather has also accounted for a slow hunt, said Howard Burt, FWP regional wildlife manager. He said sightings have been scarce, although there were some sightings.

"They're a little cagier than people think," he said of wolves.

Hunters have yet to kill any wolves in district 320, which includes the Highland Mountains south of Butte.

Thompson said he is confident the first 100 wolves will be killed, but after that he's less certain. He said he's confident that as the hunt goes on, hunters' attitudes toward wolves will change.

"I don't hear much about hunters being very happy with wolves until they get one and then they're pretty darn happy just like they are when they get a deer or an elk," he said. "In the long run, Montana's going to have an additional hunting tradition that we didn't have before."

Mistakes by big-game hunters in Colorado are killing moose

In the aftermath of the state's 11th case of mistaken identity so far this hunting season, Colorado Parks and Wildlife is at its wits' end.

"A lot of people are shooting moose on elk licenses," said CPW statewide information officer Randy Hampton. "It's happening too frequently and it's frustrating. People need to take some time and identify their target clearly. It's the first rule of hunter safety: Know what you're shooting at."

While the vast majority of the state's 300,000 annual big-game hunters go through the season without incident, more than a dozen didn't in 2010. And despite increased educational efforts, the potential remains for even more moose to suffer from a similar lack of scruples this year.

The latest incident occurred Oct. 22 near Silverthorne, where hikers reported an encounter with a hunter who told them he had shot a bull moose by mistake. The individual has yet to report the incident to wildlife officers.

"We would like to hear from this person or from anyone else who knows who he is," said district wildlife manager Shannon Schwab (970-485-3081).

Callers wishing to remain anonymous can contact Operation Game Thief toll free at 877-265- 6648. Operation Game Thief offers a reward if a tip leads to a citation.

The relatively small moose population in Colorado is about 1,700. If a hunter without the proper license shoots a moose, the fine can be more than \$1,000 and hunting privileges can be lost. Wildlife officials say there is no excuse for mistaking the animals.

Among the vast differences between elk and moose: A mature Shiras bull moose weighs 1,200 pounds (about twice as much as an average bull elk), is dark brown with a bulbous nose and broad, flat antlers. Typically, moose won't flee when approached by hunters.

Elk are much lighter brown, with a pale yellow rump, narrow snout and branched, pointed antlers. They travel in herds and will flee at the sight of humans.

Wildlife managers also report an increase in accidental mule deer kills by hunters holding elk licenses this fall.

Busting old hunters' tales about whitetails

A firearms deer season comparable to last year, when 207,000 whitetails were harvested by nearly a half-million Minnesota hunters, is on tap when shooting starts early Saturday morning, according to the Department of Natural Resources.

Here's a look at some assumptions, and mis-assumptions, hunters will take with them to their stands.

Myth

A well-placed heart and/or lung shot will drop a deer in its tracks, or shortly thereafter.

Fact

Sometimes yes, oftentimes no. And in cases when a deer shot in the heart or lungs doesn't drop, it can travel much farther than many hunters believe. Moreover, even seriously wounded deer can appear to tracking hunters to bleed more profusely than they actually are.

In one study using beef blood to simulate a bleeding deer, a pool of blood 12 inches across required only 6 ounces of blood to create.

Yet a loss of about 42 ounces of blood is required for a deer to bleed to death, according to Leonard Lee Rue III, author of the encyclopedic "The Deer of North America."

Also: Deer shot through the heart in almost all instances will drop sooner than those shot only through the lungs. Either way, seriously wounded deer -- those shot through the heart and/or lungs -- can travel farther than most hunters think. Distances of up to and exceeding 100 yards are not uncommon.

Myth

The most important factor leading to the harvesting of a buck by a Minnesota firearms hunter is the timing of the season to coincide with the rut.

Fact

Most important to harvesting a Minnesota buck is the amount of time spent in the field by the hunter.

James Kroll, aka "Dr. Deer," the new Wisconsin Deer Czar hired to review whitetail management in the Badger State, and possibly recommend management changes there, advises that hunters who stay in their stands during daytime significantly increase their odds of killing deer, big bucks in particular.

"The best time to kill a mature buck is midday," Kroll says, adding that deer do a better job of patterning hunter movement than vice versa. "Since most hunters are in their stands the first two hours of daylight and the last two hours of daylight, mature bucks often move at midday. I'm amazed at how anxiously hunters await the deer season, then they only hunt four hours a day," Kroll said. "Hunt all day and you'll be surprised how many more deer you will see."

The role of the rut in Minnesota whitetail hunting success can't be discounted: Between Nov. 1 and Nov. 15, whitetail bucks here actively seek mates, at times moving when they otherwise wouldn't in other months of the year, such as during midday.

But an equally important factor affecting deer movement is the mass disruption caused by the influx into woods and fields of between 400,000 and 500,000 hunters. This increases the chance of a kill for the hunter who stays in his or her stand all day.

Myth

All bucks are uniformly affected by the rut.

Fact

While the rut does inspire more-or-less careless roaming by bucks, it's also true old bucks didn't reach their tender age by wandering aimlessly in daytime. When confronted by hunter pressure, which they seem to sense intuitively, older bucks often move only at night -- a fact made especially evident in recent decades by the use of trail cameras.

Similarly, older bucks seem often more inclined to hide from danger than to flee it. Which is why, for example, pheasant hunters often nearly step on big bucks while tromping the edges of wetlands.

Myth

Weather affects deer movement, just as it affects fishing success.

Fact

Deer are affected by weather, oftentimes significantly, but usually in a way opposite to how weather affects fishing success.

Example: Fish often bite best ahead of a front, or change of weather. Movement of deer, on the other hand, is often more predictable after a front moves through.

This is often most noticeable in Minnesota after a snowstorm. During the storm itself, and leading up to it, deer sightings can be few. But the day after, particularly if clear, sunny weather prevails, deer often resume traditional movements, particularly those related to feed.

Bill Marchel, the Brainerd-area outdoor writer, photographer and student of deer, believes dew point often predicts deer movement, even more than barometric pressure. "The lower the dew point, the drier the air, the more deer move," he said. "This is especially a factor in bow season, in September and October."

Myth

Dumb luck plays a role in Minnesota firearms deer hunting success.

Fact

Actually this is true -- in some instances. Given the large number of hunters in the state, some are bound to stumble into big bucks, sometimes blindly.

But over time, deer hunting success, like success in any other venture, is enjoyed most often by those who prepare best. Hunters who scout, erect stands in strategic locations or otherwise pick hunting spots with knowledge of how deer move, and refine their skills with grunt calls, rattling antlers and scents (masking and/or attracting, depending on your beliefs/gullibility), among other gear, will lead to the most deer encounters.

Of course shooting straight is critical, too.

16-foot python devours deer in Florida



A Burmese python slithering through the Everglades proved that her eyes weren't bigger than her stomach, swallowing intact a 76-pound deer.

At 15.65 feet, the python isn't the largest on record. But the size of her prey both impresses and concerns state and federal wildlife scientists and land managers trying to control the non-native species.

"They are large exotic animals that are not naturally from this area," said Randy Smith, spokesperson for the South Florida Water Management District. "The potential to wreak havoc on the natural Florida wildlife ... they don't have true enemies."

Contractors spraying exotic vegetation Thursday came across the female python on an island about 20 miles from Everglades National Park, Smith told CNN Tuesday. It was dispatched, by protocol, with a single shotgun blast to the head.

A necropsy conducted by Everglades National Park wildlife biologists showed the python had a girth of 44.1 inches after devouring the adult female deer. The snake normally weighed 139 pounds.

Officials Tuesday said they are trying to determine the age and health of the deer.

"We see them on a regular basis," Smith said of pythons. "We've dispatched hundreds of these in the past few years." The menu for Burmese, rock and African pythons includes rodents, birds or smaller snakes. In 2005, a python apparently busted its gut after it had consumed a 6-foot alligator.

Some of the snakes may have escaped enclosures after Hurricane Andrew's widespread destruction in 1992.

But there's a more likely cause for the problem.

"Obviously, some of these were pets," Smith said. When people realize they are going to grow up to be much larger than they expected, they often release the creatures into the wild.

That's the worst thing you can do, officials said.

Management and park officials have tried trapping, but that's largely failed.

Scientists and park managers are studying the exotic reptiles' breeding habits and pinpointing their locations to devise a strategy for controlling them.

"It's not meant to be successful in this habitat," Linda Friar, spokeswoman for Everglades National Park, said of the Burmese python. "We don't have any idea how many there are. This is the biggest (one) we have ever dealt with."

The giant reptiles compete with alligators and crocodiles.

Although pythons have been found in or near some residential areas west of Miami, there have been no reports of injuries to people, Smith said.

Friar said invasive fish species, such as walking catfish and lionfish, are an even bigger problem in southern Florida.